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ABSTRACT

Acting Style refers to the individual characteristics of appearance, voice, movement, and temperament that distinguish one actor from another. Based on the theory that the black actor tends to approach a role presentation on a visceral level of communication, in contrast to the white actor's intellectual approach, this study identified those elements that characterize a black acting style. The design used in this addressed the following issues: the creative process involved in the actor's approach to the role; the communicative process that the actor uses to relate his message or character to the audience; the audience's encoding and decoding of the actor's message; acting theories and supportive data; and the need for further interdisciplinary research in theater study. For the study, twenty judges measured the perceived believability of the acting performance of both black and white actors according to seven items of evaluation in a one-to-ten system. Results indicate that the distinguishing elements that characterize the black acting style are present in the actor's perception and in verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication. (MAI)

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A POSITION PAPER:

BLACK ACTING STYLES - AN IDENTIFICATION

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Within the realm of communications exists a phenomenon quite often experienced, enjoyed, and disgarded, left undefined, unidentified and unexplored. The occurrence of which I speak is the aesthetic communicative art of Theatre. Within the theatre experience exists an even greater undefined and unexplored facet, the acting process. Theorists such as Stanislavski (1936), Alexander (1969), Grotowski (1970), Spolin (1963), etc., have attempted to meet the challenge of defining and exploring this area by articulating theories which explore the actor's creative process. However, these theories, despite their espoused universal applicability, have failed to meet the needs of actors of varying talents, temperaments, and backgrounds. This conclusion is evident if one examines reports such as the Graham (1966) and Gunkle (1971) publications. These reports clearly substantiate the instability and unreliability of the success, given to actor training methods employed in college, university and professional environments throughout the country. They further sound the need for research investigating these and other theories.

Further observation places focus on the Stanislavski Method of actor training and its implementation in such varying population distributions as Howard University, George Washington University, and at the Actor's Studio in New York City. For examples, classes at the Actor's Studio are attended by 1) professionally working actors, 2) generally a mature, experienced individual, 3) quite often a person holding college or academic experience prior to this exposure, and 4) a self-supporting individual. Classes at George Washington University are generally attended by 1) students lacking a professional theatrical background, 2) young and inexperienced individuals, 3) students with not more than a high school diploma, 4) students of a higher

socio-economic background, 5) students possessing extensive previous exposure to the Arts, and 6) individuals of European-American descent. Classes at Howard University are generally attended by 1) students lacking a professional theatrical background, 2) young and inexperienced individuals, 3) students with no more than a high school diploma, 4) individuals of lower to middle socio-economic background 5) students possessing little previous exposure to the Arts, and 6) individuals of Afro-American descent. Thus, this one system or actor-training method is being used to train actors of differing backgrounds, talents, and temperaments. This causes question as to whether the occasional failures of this particular actor-training method are due in part to the apparent variance of the talents, temperaments, and backgrounds of the student actors employed for its utilization.

Thus, if questions are raised which doubt the "universal applicability" of actor training methodologies or techniques, which are derived from various acting theories, one might, for further enlightenment, focus on the actor's communicative process and examine its multi-faceted network, in an attempt to isolate and identify the elements of its composition. Therefore, this paper presumes to identify, and thus establish one aspect of this acting process which focuses on one select group of actors, the communicative process of the black actor (the black acting style).

In order that misunderstanding be kept at a minimum, this writer takes this opportunity to establish an operational definition for the term, acting style. Garff B. Wilson (1955) most accurately and simply accomplishes this task by stating "... it is the individual characteristics of appearance, voice, movement, and temperament which distinguishes one actor from another." Therefore, if one examines the individual characteristics of appearance, voice, movement, and temperament of black actors, one might obtain a clear understanding of the stylization which could then be identified as black

acting.

Indirectly, this task of identification is inherent in studies articulating Black English (Dillard, 1971) and cross-cultural communication (Kochman, 1971). Furthermore, particular emphasis should be placed on the area of nonverbal communications. For this area, if examined, can clearly aid in identifying the individual characteristics of movement as an aspect of style for the black actor.

Reviewing the studies of Johnson (1971), and Ruesch and Kees (1964), yield interesting and pertinent results. Their conclusions are as follows:

1. Black dialect has a different base for development from other variables of American English which can be extended to nonverbal communicative patterns.
2. The isolation of the black population from other Americans produce differences in nonverbal communication patterns within the Black culture, and
3. Not every Black person exhibits every feature in his nonverbal behavior. However, these features occur with such great frequency in the Black population that they can be considered patterned behavior.

If these conclusions have any basis of external validity, then a case may be made for isolating and identifying the Black actor, as exhibiting characteristics illustrative of a cultural background or heritage, different than the milieu of all actors.

Further studies have examined cultural differences in perception (Campbell, 1964). Perceptual differences, it is speculated, effect appearance and movement according to the culturally accepted perception. If one could apply this conclusion to acting, this additional data further supports the premise that a black acting style is an identifiably unique and

present form of communication. As D. Price-Williams (1972) explains:

> In the same way that the study of individuals shows to what degree a particular person is similar to, or different from others, so cross-cultural studies focus on the similarities and differences of whole societies. Psychological cross-cultural studies provide an expansive background against which to plot information about any one society....Apart from the advantage of utilizing the differences between cultures as a buffer against generalizing from a comparatively small sample of the earth's population, cross-cultural work has the further asset of seeking out situations and influences which are either difficult to find in our own culture, or are just nonexistant.

In an age and time of increased specificity, researchers and academicians of theatre must be forced to recognize the cultural differences which exist in the area of acting. They must further realize the utmost significance of making generalizations which characterize groups such as actors collectively. They must, therefore, pursue avenues which break down generalized categories, and build up identifiable specific differences which establish cultural patterns of communication. To this end is the goal of a study currently in progress (Newman, 1977).

Based on the theory that black actors tend to initially approach a role presentation on a visceral level of communication whereas white actors tend to approach a role presentation from an intellectual approach, this study identifies those elements which characterize a black acting style. To this end, the study introduces an evaluative instrument, used by twenty judges to measure the perceived believability of an acting performance. There are seven areas/items of evaluation.

1. Concentration - This involves the perceived degree of discipline the actor communicates through sustaining a character, creation of objects, degree of relaxation, and use of images.

2. Imagination - This involves the actors ability to use the stage areas and objects; in short, the degree of creativity shown by the actor during performance.

3. Physical Action - This is the measure of believability of body movement, reactions, gestures, and responses communicated by the actor, mainly the actor's nonverbal communicative factors.

4. Characterization - This is the measure of whether or not the actor has understood and completed analysis of the character; in short, whether the character's age etc. is apparent.

5. Technique - This is the measure of the actor's ability to control what is being executed on stage, using such acting devices as transition, pacing, timing, rhythm etc. (another nonverbal measure).

6. Vocalization - This area is the measure of the actor's speech and vocal techniques in communicating a character; namely the diction, projection, variety, intensity, rhythms, articulation, and enunciation employed. (a verbal measure).

7. Motivation - This final area evaluated the actor on his or her ability to justify or add depth to the performance; in short, the degree of believability present.

The scale used on this form is a one-to-ten point system. Zero is the bottom of the scale. Ten is the highest attainable score. This instrument has its pre-test results from data obtained on several pilot runs at Howard University's Department of Drama. These runs occurred in four different levels of acting classes, using four hundred performances, eighty students, and three judges, from September, 1976, to May, 1977.

From these pilot tests the following revisions of the instrument were made.

1. The scale, where initially unequally weighted, (Physical action--0-15 possible points originally), now shows equal weight on all items. The change reflects pilot judge opinions that all items are difficult to distinguish in terms of defining weight. Thus, they should be of equal value.
2. The items or areas on the form included a space for judges to evaluate the "Overall Believability." This item is eliminated on the form previously presented. This is done reflecting the information obtained from the judges who used the instrument for these pilot runs. Their comment communicates a feeling that this item is seemingly unnecessary due to it being a repeat of the culmination of all of the previous items.
3. All other tiems appear to be clear, concise and easily comprehensible.

In light of the problems which exist in the area of acting, the research methodology and design used in this study attempts to address the following issues:

1. The creative process involved in the actor approaching role

In order to explore an actor's creative process in approaching a role, this study takes specific focus on the effectiveness of an actor-training method which is employed in establishing and developing the actor's process of role presentation or character. Because of its apparent popularity and purported universality, the Stanislavski System of actor-training serves as the foundation for this investigative pursuit. It is then the results of this measured effectiveness that supplies the data which can give insights into the nature (the universality and the needs) of the actor's creative process.

2. The communicative process the actor uses to relate his message or character to an audience

To examine this particular feature of the acting experience, a simulated performance situation is adopted. It is thought that by creating a performance situation, one which is as close to the "actual actor--audience relationship" during the performance of a play, can the necessary pressures and responses of the actor be produced. Fur er, it is under these conditions that the "communicative process" of the actor exists and operates.

3. The audience's encoding and decoding process of the actor's message or the perceived believability of the actor

In an attempt to identify the audience's perceived believability of an acting performance, the previously mentioned actor evaluation instrument is given to an audience after having viewed several various acting performances. In addition, the Richardson-Waal (1966) instrument assessing the reliability of judging an acting performance is given to the audience. This measure gives an assessment of the audience's encoding and decoding process.

4. The manner in which acting theories and subsequent training methodologies have derived

The Stanislavski System, as with many others, was developed with the intention of being used for European actors. This raises, again, the

question of universal applicability of the technique. Further, as Gunkle (1971) points out, most theatre research derives from empirical or descriptive investigations. This study attempts to examine the acting area using experimental procedures.

5. The quantity and quality of supportive data which scientifically investigates these theories and techniques.

By applying experimental procedures and by careful establishment of control techniques, the quality of the data returned should prove to supplement the quantity of supportive information from which predictions can occur.

6. The need for a further interdisciplinary approach to be applied which may help in the continued exploration and definition of the phenomenon of theatre

The field of communications serves as a natural tool for redefinition of the theatre phenomenon. Theatre has been and is openly considered an artistic mode of creation. Only recently, have researchers and scholars begun to include the theatre medium as a communicative processes which exist in the artistry of theatre. In addition, guidelines and specific features might be identified which could bring one closer to the realization, understanding, identification and acceptance of the black actor as being undeniably different.

Thus, the study just presented examines white and black, male and female actors according to their concentration, imagination, physical action, characterization, technique, vocalization, and motivation of performance. If differences do exist along any of the above criteria, those elements which characterize the black actor may be distinguished. In addition, one might, from the obtained data, draw a clearer insight as to whether these elements of performance have any relationship to the actor's background. In short, the results from the Newman study should yield interesting conclusions which

may aid in the identification process of a black acting style.

In summary, the black actor does exist as a phenomenon of theatre. Researchers have already begun to identify the Black-American as a legitimate figure within society. The Dillard (1972), Kochman (1971), Johnson (1971), and Ruesch and Kees (1964) studies are but some of the investigations which support this thesis. Thus, if the Black-American can be identified as possessing characteristics peculiar to their background and heritage, it would then follow that black actors possess characteristics which distinguish them from the total group of American actors. Further, from these reports, the elements which appear to be the distinguishing characteristics of Black-Americans are laiden in their perception, verbal, and nonverbal patterns of communication. Consequently, the perception, verbal, and nonverbal communicative patterns of black actors should compose and present the black acting style. The previously introduced study will bring one closer to supporting or rejecting this conclusion. However, regardless of these findings, those of us who envision theatre as a vital and necessary facet of any culture or society, must, without hesitation, design and pursue all avenues which help identify, expose, and strengthen the legitimacy of the black actor. As the "call-response" mechanism in black preaching demands attention and response, so this paper sets the call in motion for further investigation as to what additional elements characterize a black acting style. The response is yet awaiting.

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